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C O N F I D E N T I A L SANTO DOMINGO 000590

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS III #20: ANECDOTES FROM "THE
PRE-CAMPAIGN"

Classified By: Economic-Political Counselor Michael A. Meigs, Reason 1.
4(d)

¶1. (U) This is the 20th cable in our series on Dominican
politics in the third year of the administration of President
Leonel Fernandez.

(U) The presidential election in the Dominican Republic will
not take place until May 2008; however, the Dominican
Liberation Party's internal primary race is heating up. We
therefore offer these anecdotes on what Dominicans politely
call "the pre-campaign."

FERNANDEZ WILL RUN FOR RE-ELECTION

-- (C) The "announcement watch" continues. No one doubts
that Leonel Fernandez is seeking a third term in office, even
though he has still not formally declared his candidacy. In
February, the political committee of Fernandez's PLD party
put his name on the slate of three "pre-candidates" for the
presidency for its May primary. His support committee has
put up a large number of campaign billboards in recent weeks,
many of them artfully designed to suggest spontaneous popular
support for him.

-- (U) All of this raises the question, When will Fernandez
announce? The answer may have come this week, as the
newspaper Hoy reported that the President will formally
declare his candidacy on March 25 at an event at the Palacio
de los Deportes. The Embassy is seeking confirmation of this
report.

PRIMARY CAMPAIGN OPENS

-- (C) The PLD's National Electoral Commission declared the
presidential "pre-campaign" open on March 13. Facing

Fernandez in the primary race are Danilo Medina, the incumbent President's powerful former Chief of Staff, and Jose Tomas Perez, a former Senator. A poll by Carlos Fara and Associates showed Fernandez leading Medina by 89 percent to 9 percent. Given Medina's longstanding position of power in the PLD, the Embassy's contacts foresee a closer race that this poll indicates -- while they still argue that Fernandez maintains a sizable lead. As for Perez, he polled at just over one percent, which supports our earlier speculation -- and it is only that -- that his candidacy was encouraged by party leaders who believed that having a third candidate would make the primary process appear to be more open and democratic.

-- (U) The PLD primary vote will be held May 6 at voting stations throughout the country. Some 1,159,000 party members are eligible to vote in a process that will be supervised by the Central Election Board.

CHURCH AND STATE

-- (SBU) The Bishop of La Vega, Antonio Camilo, caused a stir this week when he criticized the practice of presidential re-election. Camilo said that re-election had historically been "fatal" for the Dominican Republic, a country that since 1930 has experienced the 31-year dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo and the 22-year rule of strongman Joaquin Balaguer. The Bishop argued the risk of the use of official resources for political campaigns is high, and that when incumbents run for office "a great deal of Government funds that belong to the people are lost." Camilo also lamented the re-election campaigns distract bureaucrats from their official duties, saying that "we should call attention (to this problem), that officials should be serving the country and attending to

their obligations in this nation that has so many needs."

-- (SBU) Camilo's comments drew an immediate response from the Fernandez campaign, which had already been goaded by anti-re-election arguments put forward by both its PLD rival Medina and the opposition Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD). Ligia Amada Melo, PLD party leader and Minister of Higher Education, accused the Bishop of being a supporter of the PRD, citing the fact that Camilo did not oppose the 2004 re-election campaign of the PRD's Hipolito Mejia. Amada did qualify her comments, saying that the PLD was not "fighting with the priests"; rather, the party opposed the prelates "getting involved in issues that do not concern them."

-- Drafted by Peter Hemsch

12. (U) This report and extensive other material can be consulted on our SIPRNET site,
<http://www.state.sgov/p/wha/santodomingo/>
HERTELL